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# Re-discovering Church

Rosemary Haughton

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### Recommended Citation

Haughton, Rosemary, "Re-discovering Church" (1987). *Marianist Award Lectures*. 18.  
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ROSEMARY HAUGHTON

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*Marianist Award Lecture/1987*

# Re-Discovering Church



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*The University of Dayton*

# RE-DISCOVERING CHURCH

by ROSEMARY HAUGHTON

Marianist Award Lecture  
1987

THE UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

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ROSEMARY HAUGHTON is an internationally known religious scholar, leader, and expert on Catholic renewal. Born in England in 1927 of an English mother and American father, she is married and mother of ten children and several foster children, now grown and mostly with families of their own. In 1974 she and her husband and others founded a community in Southwest Scotland, called Lothlorien, which works with mentally troubled people.

Mrs. Haughton began writing in her thirties, and her writing brought invitations to lecture in the United States. Over the years this experience led to her interest and involvement in the movement of base Christian communities in North America. She now lives and works in such a community, whose work developed in response to the needs of homeless people by providing both shelter and housing. This community, Wellspring House, Inc., in Gloucester, Massachusetts, was founded in 1981 and has gained respect and acclaim for its pioneer work for the homeless, especially battered women and children.

Wellspring House is also the base for a training program known as Movement for North American Mission for lay people of any denomination interested in serving the poor in North America. Mrs. Haughton codirects the program with Nancy Schwoyer, another founder-member of Wellspring House, with whom she also forms a team, leading retreats, workshops and lectures.

In the midst of a life filled with children and service to others, Mrs. Haughton has found the time to write over 30 books. Among her best known books are *The Transformation of Man* (1967 and reprinted 1982); *The Catholic Thing* (1980); *The Passionate God* (1981) and *The Re-Creation of Eve* (1985). She has received six honorary degrees and numerous awards for her achievements.

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*The following lecture was given at the University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio, on the occasion of the presentation of the Marianist Award to Rosemary Haughton, January 28, 1987.*

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## RE-DISCOVERING CHURCH

**I**T IS an unusual privilege for me to be able to make a presentation at which the subject is for me to decide, and which therefore gives me the opportunity to develop ideas which particularly interest me at the moment. There is an ancient story about the person who said “How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?”, and most people find this funny because people are supposed to think first and speak afterwards. But people like myself who lecture or write don’t really find it funny, but rather a realistic expression of the fact that for many of us it is the act of writing, or speaking out loud, that actually pulls together inchoate ideas, bits of information, and random intuitions, and gives them a coherence that deserves to be described as thought. That is why I welcomed this opportunity to try to discover what I think, as a Catholic in the eighties, standing at my own particular center of varied experiences—personal, ecclesial and global—at this point in my life.

### **New Self-Awareness of Catholicism**

The invitation to receive this award mentioned that my past work has brought together dogma and spirituality in a practical way—that I believe that lived theology emerges from prayer, faith and community, and that I treasure the Catholic tradition. It is true that I have done, or tried to do, these things. And it is in trying to do these things that I have found myself being forced constantly to re-discover the meaning of the faith all of us both live and struggle to live. Each of us does it differently because our experiences are different, but those varied experiences interact with each other, forming the fine interwoven

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network of Catholic life. However, this net, like any net, consists mostly of holes, so that when the net "catches" the experiences which are our history, our culture, much of it goes through the holes, because no human system can possibly express and embody every aspect of creation. But the net does hold a great deal, indeed it holds things we might, sometimes, prefer to throw back in the sea. Instead we need to look at the catch, understand it, sort it, but since this is a very unusual kind of net, what happens next is that what has been caught becomes, somehow, part of the fabric of the net itself, the new self-awareness of Catholicism. That is as near as I can get to expressing something of the process by which our ecclesial reality changes, as the people who compose it re-discover, through dynamic interchanges of ecclesial culture, the meaning of their existence as people of faith.

### **My Process of Re-Discovery**

What are the things caught in the net that have motivated my own process of re-discovery? I don't apologize for taking the time to talk about this, because it seems to me that it is essential for all of us to understand how our experience shapes our ecclesial understanding, and to undertake our re-discovery *consciously*, not driven by experience but using it. This is something one may do, initially, just to preserve one's sanity and sense of self, yet the individual experience is not an isolated thing. Each person experiences things that are interwoven with the experience of others at many points, and which together form the whole cultural experience of a given time and place. In the case of people with a specific faith-identity, this experience—common and personal—is interpreted in terms of particular religious language—itself, again, the produce of generations of reflection on experience. As a writer, it is my job to be aware of the growth and change of language which we call theology, and my own personal experience is my starting point in understanding how that works. The various categories of my experience are shared with many others, yet they are also mine—the net is made of little knots, meaningless alone, yet together forming something immensely strong and useful.

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In the categories of experience, first there is my age. I shall be sixty this year, and I became a Catholic in 1943 at the age of sixteen, in the middle of a world war. I was received into the Church and attended Mass in a church lit only by altar candles, because of the blackout, and I came to Mass one morning to find the church a mass of rubble. I had Jewish relatives who had escaped from Austria just before the frontiers closed, and we knew what might happen to us as a partly Jewish family if the Nazis crossed the narrow waters that inadequately protected England from invasion.

I was eighteen when the atom bomb was dropped, so the experience of war, yet with memories of a pre-war world, culminated in the ushering in of the "nuclear age", whose significance took time to become clear, and at the same time that "the bomb" ended the war, the facts of what was only later called the Holocaust began to be told.

My "spiritual life" as I learned (and later unlearned) to call it, was that of the time. I learned Catholic spirituality before Vatican II, was nurtured on Thomas à Kempis and Abbot Marmion and Janet Erskine Stuart and Pascal and Bernanos and all those people. At art school in wartime London, I sat on the grass in the park in my lunch hour and read Dame Julian, and historical novels about the persecution of Catholics under Elizabeth I. I swallowed it all, good and bad, with indiscriminating enthusiasm. Later, already married and with a growing family (growing in both senses) I encountered Thomas Merton, became somewhat intoxicated with him, and then, as it were, "grew up" with him, as he struggled, explored, and changed. I lived through the excitement and upheavals of Vatican II, the shock of Charles Davis's decision to leave the Church, the chaos of the liturgical changes. I was able to feel both the loss of loved customs and the hope of newness. So I have had time to add my own span of experience to my strong sense of history. I have read the strange stories of Christianity and learned to recognize that corruption, timidity, and sheer blindness in the government of the Church are not new, and exist alongside all



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that is passionate, divinely energetic and alive in the same tradition.

Secondly, therefore, there is my European background, out of which my sense of history grows, which has enabled me to make sense of much of the contemporary experience. I have dual citizenship, but I was born and raised in England and my outlook and nostalgias are English. So my sense of Catholicism is bound up with my awareness of roots in the ancient churches and shrines of England, which in turn have their roots in a long pre-Christian past, inheriting its symbols, its demons, and its mystical awareness. I know the importance of place, and roots, and I know the crucial but hard-to-define phenomenon of culture—the way a group of people feel, think, expect, react, and always assume that their way is the normal way, and that others are “foreign” and strange. I also know, more perhaps than most Americans do or have done until recently, that landscape is not just “nature”. In England, landscape is the result of centuries of interaction between land and people, creating unique patterns, for good or ill. So, history and ecology, religion and culture, are linked and inseparable in my experience and in my theology.

### **Age and European Background**

Thirdly, there is the fact that I’ve raised a large family, and they grew up in the sixties and seventies, through all those times of the sexual revolution, the hippies and drop-outs and the rise of the drug culture. Now my children are raising families of their own, having survived all those things, but by no means unscarred. In their consciousness and also in mine is the awareness that the world looks different when you see it with eyes which have learned skills of seeing through the women’s movement and the peace movement, and all of it under the constant shadow of possibly—even probably—nuclear annihilation. I learn from them, from their suffering and their dreams and their failures and their successes, their values and their desires. Through them I am in touch with a changed culture, different religious experiences and different ecclesial expectation—or

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lack of expectation.

One more strand in my experience—that of community, especially community for the sake of the marginalized. At one time I had the experience of rural community in Scotland, devoted to the needs of the mentally ill; and based in a farm. That chaotic but rewarding experience reinforced the sense of the land as the literal basis of human life and community, land as the source of wealth and health, land as God's gift, not as a commodity to be exploited for private gain. And more recently my experience of community has been in this country, involved in providing a place of hospitality for homeless women and children, and in finding ways to create low-cost housing. In my discovery of myself as a feminist, this experience of life with and for marginalized women has been radicalizing.

### **Family and Community**

That's a lot of very varied experience. But for me it all comes together, and all of it has been part of my own re-discovery of Church. This has come about because, for sheer spiritual survival, I had to find a way to make sense of all this—and "making sense" of varied experience is precisely the motivation of all genuine theological discovery. Being a person who reads, I read—at each stage and turn of my life I asked questions and demanded answers. I have a naturally enquiring mind which asks "Why" about everything from the nutritional content of bread to papal authority. So in my need to re-discover ecclesial reality out of all this, I didn't only read theology (especially biblical studies), I read books on biology and the new physics, on world food production, on the history of women and the women's movement, on organizational culture, and lots more. I am not saying this in order to demonstrate my wide reading—it is sometimes so wide it might better be termed random—but because it seems to me very important to recognize that we live in a time when we have tools for understanding the human situation, and the human life within creation, in ways that have never been possible before. At the same time

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we as Catholics have experienced an opening of the Scriptures of an unprecedented kind, and the two kinds of knowledge—the apparently secular and the apparently sacred—come together, so we discover that this dualism is as false as all the other dualisms which opposed nature and grace, flesh and spirit.

### **Making Sense of Experience**

For me, as for many others, the experiences of the past decades have shattered many comforting and apparently coherent ways of thinking, and forced me to find new ways to understand and live. The Church I joined at sixteen—or rather my understanding of the Church I joined—was a coherent, intellectually satisfying system. It was a true guide and support and, more importantly for me, it was the context in which innumerable amazing people had flourished, their lives a promise that my own life could be different, more exciting, and stranger than those I saw around me. But the impact of the experiences I have sketched dismantled much of the coherence and comfort. I remember the shock I felt on the day I first realized how much of theology, how many doctrinal definitions (not to mention Canon Law) were simply designed to justify a power-system which had grown more entrenched and more self-convinced through the centuries. Once that shattering realization dawned I also began to realize how effective this system was in preserving allegiance by guilt-creating mechanisms and this awareness was reinforced by realizing that both the passion for power and the guilt-creating spirituality were denounced by Jesus, who saw them at work in his own religious tradition.

My experience of working with marginal people, especially women, made me aware of how the social system creates and maintains marginality for its own purposes, which it justifies in exalted terms, and how religion sets up the same mechanisms and re-inforces them with religious sanctions. But what is the alternative? Hierarchy is not a Catholic invention, it is something the church picked up because that is how the world operates. But, however historically understandable and even effective it may be, for me it is no longer possible to say “church” and mean primarily any kind of hierarchical structure. Hierarchy

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is not of the essence, it is something the church developed because, collectively, it seemed the obvious thing to do, even though in so doing the plain message of Jesus about the danger of domination and misuse of power were ignored, or somehow "spiritualized". Even if the structure were entirely populated by saints and sages—and indeed it has contained a goodly population of both—the shape of it does not seem to me to reflect the pattern of creation. That is where my encounter with what modern biology and physics is telling us has helped us to re-discover what "church" can mean, and be.

An introduction to systems theory simply made it impossible to think of the living reality of Christian community in terms of dominance and control, however kind and well meant. The insights of biology and physics show us a universe in which each particle is part of a system, and is in itself a system, all interdependent and alive, none dominant yet each needing every other, from subatomic particles to the solar system, and beyond.

### **A New Understanding**

Scientists sometimes find themselves using the language of mysticism to describe what they discover. They dare to use the word "love" to describe that power in the observed universe which generates and regenerates, unconquerable, overcoming death, in a creation intricately ordered and yet allowing glimpses of the transcendence which both completes and confounds the order we can understand. So as one concept of church fell apart, another shone through—and it was confirmed both by my own experience and by the stories of those amazing characters, the saints and mystics, who to me had always been the real bearers of the stream of life which is Catholicism. Their hopes, dreams, and battles (often with the dominant ecclesial institutions), their sufferings and achievements, were the heart of the tradition. They (the known and unknown saints and heroines and heroes) were the creation of the true ecclesial culture which no amount of ecclesiastical timidity, prejudice and blindness could completely distort.

But the most important thing about the saints was that the

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church they lived and felt in their bones was that interdependent reality of God and humankind which is proclaimed in the gospels. In the saints, and those who gathered around them and shared their vision, the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus was re-discovered and lived, however briefly. For me and for many the re-discovery of Scripture was the thing that renewed the whole sense of what "church" is about, and made it possible not only to go on calling one's self a Christian but to re-discover the sense of truth and vitality in the whole Catholic experience, which has never wholly died, and renews itself in every age and place.

### **Model of the Saints**

Like many others, I re-discovered Scripture, especially through the experience of study with others. I'd like to give an example of the kind of thing I mean, from a group experience I've been involved in. One of the things that goes on at Well-spring House, where I live, is a training program for lay people who feel called to serve the poor in their own country. The two-year program begins with five weeks of intensive orientation, and the heart of that five weeks is the daily study of Mark's gospel, right through. But at the same time the trainees are doing social analysis, having first-hand experience of the effects of poverty locally, and learning the reasons for it. They see films and attend workshops and read books which open them up to the social and economic realities of our world, and daily they begin to put all this together with their reading of Mark's gospel. The effect of this is mind-blowing. Their old categories and assumptions are challenged, a new awareness of the reality of Jesus and his message breaks through. It is disturbing, it can seem to demolish what had appeared essential. But it is exciting, life-giving, it is a conversion experience, and it is lasting. And people do it together, supporting each other, agonizing, exploring, sometimes crying, sometimes laughing.

This is the kind of thing I mean when I talk about re-discovering church, and my own experience of community itself illumines the experience, and is illuminated by it. It is not only the encounter with the gospel in a new way, in the light of the

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modern experience and modern scholarship, but a re-discovery in the context of community, creating an experience of church which itself reflects the experience of those who met Jesus and discovered a different vision of reality. That was the experience of church to which Jesus introduced people and which he invited them to re-create in other places—a new kind of community based on awareness of the love of a non-patriarchal and passionately loving Father. It was a community which re-created relationships in the image of friends sharing food and life.

Let me try, in the short time I have, to indicate how, for me, the re-discovery of church in this sense is both nourished and illumined by my own past and present experience. I have suggested that the image of reality offered by systems theory helped me to understand a reality which grows from the grassroots, is de facto decentralized in thought, feeling and action and yet nourished by a common tradition and pursuing common goals.

I see this church alive and heroic among the persecuted people of Central and South America, in the slums of Chicago or the mountains of Appalachia where some of our mission trainees have worked, and in groups bursting out in middle-class parishes. But I also see this church, moved by the same spirit, in people gathered across boundaries of denominations, and even of faith and un-faith, as human beings responding to the irrepressible life of God within them, coming together to create new possibilities. The life that persists for years in a seed lying in the desert, only to spring into flower when rain falls, is the same spirit that can slowly and painfully begin to blossom in a human life that has from the beginning been so deprived of love and hope that it seemed to have shrivelled to nothing. And just as the seed's possibility of blooming when the rain comes depends on the intricate network of life-support systems that surround it, ready to release nourishment, so a human person can only grow within a nurturing network of care and understanding and opportunity—a community, in some sense a church: that is, a gathering of people drawn by a hope and desire for new life, expressing that life in common symbols and common action.

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But it is not enough that people come together to seek and create freedom, justice, true worship in little isolated groups. The nature of a church, as opposed to just any kind of community, is to be local, but also to be part of the life-giving network which actually makes it possible for people in the local gatherings to *be* church. The existence of a common language to express the reality which is both sought and lived is not the creation of any one group, or of its leaders, or any gathering of leaders. It is developed over time, and among many changes, in response to events. It varies from place to place because each place has its own memories, its own holy places, its own historical griefs and triumphs, but each can recognize the common symbols and energizing dreams. This is what we call tradition—it is difficult to define because it is a kind of essence of culture, expressing the reality of a whole historical experience in symbol and story and ritual. Tradition is carried within a whole people and in the local gatherings, it is compressed into definition, and the definition is later taken apart, mixed yet again with the historical experience, dissolved, changed and re-defined. And in each cycle it is in places where people are drawn together by the common vision, suffering, struggling, failing, enduring, and celebrating, that the tradition is formed, tested and reformed. It is a long history, and it can never be arrested and encapsulated, but only encountered in the ever-new living of the gospel experience.

### **Re-Discovery of Scripture**

I've re-discovered the church from the ground up, and it has been a stormy and painful experience. For years, as a mother, I tried to justify the church to my children; eventually they were among those who forced me to re-discover the church for myself. There have been times when I felt I had lost too much, that the historical glory, the sweet strength of the mystics, the depth of symbol and celebration, the recurring beauty of festivals, were draining away from me as I was obliged to recognize the existence of false, demeaning spirituality, of deception, power-seeking and cowardice as prevailing influences in the body I had joined with such enthusiasm as an adolescent. But

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I don't think I've lost those good things, I believe I have discovered anew how they do grow, fallibly but truly, from that unique explosion of divine energy which we call the Incarnation.

In many ways this is a painful time to be a Catholic. We seem to be in danger of losing a vision which had been regained after long struggle, and more and more people are being driven to conclude that the historical shape of authority in the church has more to do with the human desire for power and control, and the human ability to hide that motive under religious language, than with the gospel of human solidarity and the hope of the reign of God. But now, new ways of decision making, and organizing, the experience of the effectiveness of decentralized grass-roots movements, the experience gained through support groups (such as those of the women in our house), new understandings of how culture and community occur—many such things confirm with growing assurance the vision and practice of Jesus himself, and of those of his followers who, through the ages, have never lost hope that a different way was indeed possible, “on earth as it is in heaven.” The tradition has never been lost, and it is strong and alive. The way the tradition is institutionalized can take many forms and has taken many.

One of the truly hopeful things about our time is that we no longer have to pick up uncritically whatever models of institution are around—Roman Empire, feudal monarchy, or corporate business. We are not doomed to discover by trial and error only that some models are essentially inappropriate to the gospel vision. We can understand the way groups and cultures grow and operate, we can perceive weaknesses and learn ways to correct them. There are no perfect models, but we can choose with more wisdom and learn with more humility, in touch with so many levels of created life, so many manifestations of the intricate beauty of God's work in which humankind has a central but not separate role to play.

### **Re-Discovering a Vision**

The gospel vision of a community of interdependent people, living as brothers and sisters, is real and possible, and that



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is the heart of the experience which is church. It is possible—but we can refuse it or muddy it or destroy it. Sometimes it seems that the power of evil in the world is so great that nothing can stop it. But re-discovering the church means re-discovering hope, because in a world full of pain, fear and wickedness there are so many places where people come together to create and live the possibility of God's reign, in endurance and in joy. And this is really what the church is about.

## THE MARIANIST AWARD

Each year the University of Dayton presents the Marianist Award to a Roman Catholic distinguished for achievement in scholarship and the intellectual life.

Established in 1950, the award was originally presented to individuals who made outstanding contributions to Mariology. In 1967, the concept for the award was broadened to honor those people who had made outstanding contributions to humanity. The award, as currently given, was reactivated in 1986.

The Marianist Award is named for the founding religious order of the University of Dayton, the Society of Mary (Marianists).

Designed and executed by Brother A. Joseph Barrish, the present award is a limited edition of an original etching entitled, "Ecce Ancilla Domini," ("Behold the handmaid of the Lord," Luke 1:38). The award carries with it a stipend of \$5,000.

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## RECIPIENTS OF THE MARIANIST AWARD

1950	Juniper Carol, O.F.M.
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1953	Roger Brien
1954	Emil Neubert, S.M.
1955	Joseph A. Skelly, C.M.
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1957	Joseph McShain
1958	Winifred A. Feely
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1959	Eamon F. Carroll, O. Carm.
1961	Coley Taylor
1963	René Laurentin
1964	Philip C. Hoelle, S.M.
1965	Cyril O. Vollert, S.J.
1967	Eduardo Frei-Montalva
1986	John Tracy Ellis
1987	Rosemary Haughton